

**Religious Minorities' Fight to Remain in Iraq**  
**Testimony- US Commission on International Religious Freedom**  
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In summer 2014, ISIS took over large portions of Iraq. On August 3 of that year, they invaded Sinjar kidnapping and killing thousands of Yazidi men, women, boys, and girls. Those who could fled to their holy site of Sinjar Mountain for protection. Surrounded by ISIS and trapped without food or water, the Yazidis' situation became dire. Samaritan's Purse saw their tremendous need and helped airlift supplies to these families by helicopter in partnership with the Iraqi government. Many Yazidis did escape but were left traumatized by the experience. Understanding the enduring effects of the atrocities they suffered, Samaritan's Purse set up services for families unable to return home, including training in carpentry and sewing as well as art therapy, trauma counseling, and a medical clinic.

When conflict escalated again in Mosul in 2016, Samaritan's Purse established an Emergency Field Hospital just miles from the frontlines to provide lifesaving care to thousands of combatants and civilians injured during the conflict. With most of the Nineveh Plains were liberated by 2017, the organization shifted its focus to rebuilding and revitalizing the areas from which internally displaced people (IDPs) had fled. Since 2015, Samaritan's Purse has served over 760,000 returnees and IDPs with assistance including food, health, nutrition, shelter, psychosocial support, livelihoods, non-food items, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Samaritan's Purse conducted two large-scale assessments of minority populations in Iraq in 2017 and 2019. From thousands of survey interactions with IDPs and returnees, we heard again and again that minorities want to stay. They want to rebuild their lives because they feel a strong sense of belonging to their places of origin. It is an honor to help them return.

Our survey data shows that the top three barriers to returning for the primarily Christian and Muslim minorities in eastern Nineveh are, in order of significance, economic opportunities, shelter, and security. For Yazidis living in Sinjar, the top three barriers are the same but in a different order: security, shelter, and economic opportunity.

Samaritan's Purse has tailored the bulk of our assistance to address these core barriers. To date, we have rebuilt over 1,000 homes and plan to restore an additional 1,300 in 2020. One widowed homeowner and her family fled the Nineveh Plains with just the clothes on their backs. Three years later, when her sons braved booby traps to discover the status of their house, they found it in shambles. We restored their home, and her son said, "The presence of Samaritan's Purse transformed the situation from sadness to joy."

We have also provided herds of sheep, bee hives, and agricultural cash grants to 300 returnee households to reestablish their livelihoods. By the end of 2019, we will have helped over 1,000 households in this way. In addition, we rehabilitated an irrigation system that services more than 15 communities and benefits an estimated 16,000 people.

Needs remain, particularly in areas like Sinjar District, which have seen relatively low rates of return. Desperate to come back home, Yazidis are traveling up to three hours at great personal expense from Kurdish areas to find out if we can help them. Financial need prevents them from moving back, but with a home or hope of a job many would return. Similarly, in eastern Nineveh some villages remain completely destroyed. People displaced from these areas could return if they had assistance rebuilding their homes.

In early 2018, the number of returnees in Iraq roughly equaled the number of IDPs. Today returnee numbers are triple that of IDPs. This encouraging shift underscores the reality that Iraq is recovering. Thanks to the concerted effort of the international community and the U.S. in particular, aid is reaching minority populations. However, the work is not done.

To ensure their long-term survival in Iraq, Christian, Yazidi, and Muslim minorities need a commitment that the U.S. will stay engaged in Iraq for the next five to ten years, promoting restoration efforts and religious freedom. This commitment would reassure them that they have a future in the nation of their birth. Rebuilding will take time. There is safety in numbers as well as a sense of shared identity and belonging. But timing is crucial. We must reach those still displaced as they decide whether they have a viable future in Iraq or if they will seek asylum elsewhere. A strong commitment from the U.S. government to stand with them through the rebuild process would help tip the scale in favor of staying.